The Museum of Transology and Radical (Trans) Trust

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Abstract: In this critical commentary, I reflect on the radical possibilities of trans public history raised by the practices of the London-based Museum of Transology. First, I introduce the museum and its goals. Then, I discuss the museum's community archiving and rapid response collecting practices in connection with scholarship about the activist and communal implications of such practices. Finally, I connect the museum's work to the concept of radical (trans) trust, a term that combines the idea of radical trust from the field of public history with interdisciplinary research on trans community, concluding with the benefits of adopting radical (trans) trust on a wider scale in the heritage sector.

Introduction

In 2014, inspired by a collection of mementos from his gender affirmation surgery, trans historian and curator E-J Scott founded the Museum of Transology (MoT), a collection of objects representing the histories and lived experiences of trans people across the United Kingdom.[1] The project has grown exponentially in the past nine years, with a collection that today consists of over 400 objects donated by trans people, each accompanied by a handwritten tag describing its significance. Objects are lent out to museums, archives, and community spaces to add trans voices to exhibits and other public history projects, and will soon be available to the public to view through an online platform.[2] The collection is now physically housed at the Bishopsgate Institute (BI), a cultural institute in London. The BI provides dedicated archival space that meets professional standards, permitting MoT to safely store objects and allowing room for the collection to grow.[3]

MoT has an inherently radical mission. Scott emphasizes his desire for the museum to provide space for "trans people to talk for themselves, about themselves" in contrast to the existing historical record, which is dominated by legal and medical records and media coverage that often marginalize trans people.[4] However, MoT's

[1] Tijen Tunali, "The Museum of Transology," *Afterimage* 47, no. 4 (2020): 71.
[2] E-J Scott, "The Museum of Transology, London, England," in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, eds. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022), 190.
[3] Stefan Dickers, "Bishopsgate Institute, London, England," in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, eds. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022), 160.
[4] Birgit Bosold, E-J Scott, and Renaud Chantraine, "Queer Tactics, Handwritten Stories: Disrupting the Field of Museum Practices," *Museum International* 72, no.

radicalism is not just theoretical; it is also evident in their archival practices. This is another unique element of the museum, as many public history institutions have struggled to incorporate the voices of the communities represented within their spaces.[5] In this critical commentary, I will describe the ways that MoT approaches community archiving, and then analyze this procedure through the lens of "radical (trans) trust," which I define as radical trust, as it is understood by the field of public history, that takes on a uniquely trans character.

Community Archiving

At the time of writing, MoT volunteers meet at BI each month to participate in community archiving. These events are promoted through social media and word of mouth, and most volunteers are members of the local trans community. Though some are students or professionals from the heritage sector, there are no formal requirements to volunteer. After a brief introduction to the museum and archiving process by Scott, volunteers are given objects that have been donated to MoT, then they fill out forms documenting objects' titles, descriptions, dimensions, dates, and a list of associated keywords, allowing the items to be categorized and searched in the online repository, hosted through BI's website. Community archiving practices such as this have become common for public history projects, particularly after the social turn in history beginning in the 1960s, and especially for the histories of

3-4 (2020): 218.

[5] Annette Furo, "What Is in a Voice? A Pedagogy of Voice for Museums," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 1 (2011): 109.

marginalized communities.[6] The Community Archives and Heritage Group provides an intentionally broad definition to include the diversity of community archiving projects that exist today, describing community archiving as archival projects in which the subject matter is a community of people, and the process of creation has involved the community, often working as volunteers.[7] This definition emphasizes direct involvement, indicating one of the reasons that community archiving is valued: democratization of heritage and creation of community.[8]

In general, heritage has become increasingly democratized over time. Cultural historian Michael Kammen outlines that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the heritage sector, including museums and memorials, have aligned themselves with "democratic values and assumptions" in order to remain relevant to the public.[9] While there is still progress to be made, a broader constituency, including marginalized communities and non-academic experts, contributes to historical and commemorative

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[6] Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 27.
[7] Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn, "Community Archives: what are we really talking about?," transcript of speech delivered at CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, Prato, Italy, 2013, https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/920626/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf, 7.
[8] Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, "'It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri.' Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, eds. Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 15.
[9] Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 702.

projects today than in the past.[10] Community archiving projects are a popular form of this democratization. Archival scholars Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens argue that, when community archivists identify ties "between the production of history, education, and political struggle," it becomes a new social movement concerned with grassroots, local change.[11] MoT follows both the democratizing and activist trends, allowing any person who attends the community archiving sessions to contribute to a trans heritage project and actively connecting historical production to contemporary political struggle. For example, a post from MoT's Instagram account (@museumoftransology) on January 26, 2023 reads, "Tonight our STOP SECTION 35 protest signs go down in transcestry!"[12] This post centers trans voices and encourages the documentation of a trans-related historical event — the UK government's decision to use Section 35 of the Scotland Act to block a new Scottish law establishing a self-identification system for trans people — through a trans lens, which will create a historical record that is uniquely inclusive.

Flinn and Stevens also describe how community archiving can "deliver a strong sense of belonging or of identity, and that such feelings or identities are socially productive."[13] Michelle Caswell et al.'s ongoing research demonstrates that community members are impacted ontologically, epistemologically, and socially through

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[10] Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 598.

[11] Flinn and Stevens, 7.

[12] Museum of Transology. "Getting ready for tonight..." Instagram, January 26, 2023, accessed June 26, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn4oWC6szSh/.

[13] Flinn and Stevens, 19.

archival work.[14] By participating, community archivists come to "realize 'I am here,' 'we were here,' and 'we belong here'" — three overlapping realizations that the researchers call "representational belonging."[15] Representational belonging facilitated by community archiving work helps volunteer archivists develop and understand their sense of self, sense of history, and sense of community. As these researchers demonstrate in a later article, the sense of representational belonging cultivated through community archiving practices can be so impactful that archivists come to consider the archive a home away from home: "a welcoming space in a hostile climate" and "a space where their experiences and those of their ancestors are validated."[16]

MoT's Instagram emphasizes the community aspect of their collective archiving practice. Multiple social media posts frame archiving events as a chance for trans people to unite as a community and emphasize the centrality of community to the museum's goal of trans self-representation. The communal goals also extend beyond the bounds of heritage spaces to contemporary activism. For example, a January 18th Instagram post about the Stop Section 35 protest offered protestors who did not have a group to attend with to "join the Museum of Transology volunteer community team – all welcome, and you're safer together with us." MoT archiving events act as a source of community, and that

[14] Michelle Caswell et al., "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation," *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5-26.

[15] Ibid., 20.

[16] Michelle Caswell et al., "Imagining Transformative Spaces: The Personal–Political Sites of Community Archives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 82.

community extends to other contexts.

Radical (Trans) Trust

Community archiving projects have great confidence in their participants. I argue that in the case of MoT, community archiving represents what is known in the public history field as radical trust. Rose Sherman of the Minnesota Historical Society defines radical trust as when historical institutions become "centers for civil engagement, where people gather to meet and converse and participate in collaborative problem solving [...] an active, visible player in civil life."[17] Meg Foster argues that radical trust has flourished in the digital age, as the internet has enabled more members of the public to become involved in history projects and new methods for institutions to involve them.[18] Relatedly, Christopher Michael Jannings points out that "it has inspired a younger audience to engage history."[19] Both Foster and Jannings mention that radical trust can be a controversial concept, citing Jim Gardner of the National Museum of American History who believes that "abdicating [historians'] role and privileging the public's voice or simply doing what the public votes for" will undermine "real" history.[20] There are legitimate debates related to radical trust; for example, if a consensus about a historical topic cannot be reached by

[17] Christopher Michael Jannings, "Lest We Forget: The Library of Congress's Veterans History Project and 'Radical Trust'" (PhD dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2010), 2.
[18] Meg Foster, "Online and Plugged In?: Public History and Historians in the Digital Age," *Public History Review* 21 (2014): 5.
[19] Jannings, 3.
[20] Foster, 5; Jannings, 3.

the community, museums may need to focus on the fact-finding process or incorporate multiple narratives rather than presenting a singular "truth" in exhibits and other outcomes, which is a complex undertaking that requires thoughtful consideration.[21] Bernadette T. Lynch argues that the field of public history tends to oppose radical trust for this reason; institutions desire simplicity and stasis, and tend to remain "out of step with the dynamics of changing ideas" instead of engaging with new ideas and practices.[22]

Lynch, along with Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, elaborates that radical trust can be particularly contentious, but also especially important, when related to marginalized communities. They note that museums have contributed to and promoted many entrenched societal prejudices, including racism, sexism, and queerphobia and argue that "radical trust may help museums to become more aware of their legacies of prejudice, and unlearn them in order to openly and honestly negotiate knowledge and power with others in the future within a spirit of genuine reciprocity."[23] When public history institutions are working with a subject such as race or colonialism, it is necessary to cultivate "a radical trust in which the museum cannot control the outcome" but the affected communities can.[24] Radical trust can play a similar role in relation to trans histories, helping institutions understand their complicity "in constructing frameworks of sexual normalcy" and "defining sexual deviancy" to

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[21] Bernadette T. Lynch and Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, "Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-Production and Radical Trust in the Museum," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25, no. 1 (2010): 16.

[22] Bernadette Lynch, "Reflective Debate, Radical Transparency and Trust in the Museum," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28, no. 1 (2013): 11.

[23] Lynch and Alberti, 30.

[24] Ibid.

ultimately work against their legacy of transphobia, and allow trans communities to control their own histories and portrayals.[25]

Radical trust is a common feature of queer history, particularly oral history, though the form differs and scholars writing about the subject often do not use the term "radical trust." Oral history is commonly identified as a radical research methodology because, as Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers describe, "our sources talk back," requiring researchers to build and maintain a reciprocal foundation of trust with narrators.[26] Elspeth H. Brown and Myrl Beam contend that "these relationships of trust enable a level of intimacy and care in the interview process that makes the process of oral history uniquely valuable," but require a significant commitment "to the messiness of competing ideas of process and quality."[27] Though not using the exact term, these oral historians are describing the process of radical trust within a queer project.

Such work on radical trust is relevant to MoT. At community archiving nights, a group of people gathers to work, discuss, and solve problems together, a ritual that Sherman centers in her definition of radical trust.[28] MoT's mission to allow "trans people to talk for themselves, about themselves" rather than rely on transphobic records, archives, and museums is also ideologically

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[25] Craig Middleton and Nikki Sullivan, "KINQ Manifesto," KINQ = Knowledge Industries Need Queering, accessed February 27, 2023, https://kinqblog.wordpress.com/.

[26] Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers, "Introduction: Archives of Disruption," in *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (London: Routledge, 2022), 7.

[27] Elspeth H. Brown and Myrl Beam, "Toward an Ethos of Trans Care in Trans Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 49, no. 1 (2022): 43.

[28] Jannings, 2.

aligned with Lynch and Alberti's statements about the legacy of racism, colonialism, and other prejudices in these spaces.[29] Additionally, community archiving provides space for "sources" to "talk back."[30] For example, the process of writing down the history of an object to donate to MoT parallels the oral history process. Additionally, many community archivists have direct knowledge of the objects being archived. As most of the community archivists are also members of the local queer community, many attended the protests and pride events from which MoT is archiving signs, allowing the archivists to provide additional context to the information on archiving forms. Sometimes the connection is even more direct. At the April 2023 session, community archivists worked to catalog the performance archives of performance artist Nando Messias, who attended the session and answered questions that arose throughout the process about the items' backgrounds, uses, and materials. When problems arise, the group collaboratively discusses how to proceed, often with that historical context in mind, demonstrating a commitment to "the messiness of competing ideas of process and quality."[31]

Trust is central to facilitating a positive experience for trans people, and that trust often requires that trans identity, or at least a deep understanding of trans life, is shared between participants and organizers. In a study about trans young people's experiences with sex education, Nova J. Bradford et al. found that trans youth were disinclined to trust cisgender, heterosexual sex educators, noting that these sources tended to be uninformed or malicious toward

[29] Bosold, Scott, and Chantraine, 218; Lynch and Alberti, 30.
[30] Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers, 7.
[31] Brown and Beam, 43.

trans sexual health.[32] As one participant described, "trust means material by and for queer and trans people."[33] Trust was not considered a possibility if the educator and the young person did not share a basis of queer identity. Similarly, Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers argue that "trust and rapport can only be established in a queer framework" — not necessarily that queerness is a prerequisite for engaging with queer people, as Bradford et al.'s findings suggest, but that cisgender, heterosexual researchers need to enter queer research projects with a queer mindset.[34]

In MoT's space, the radical trust of the public history sector takes on this uniquely trans character. Community archiving events are led by Scott, who is trans, and while one does not have to be trans to attend, most participants are. Additionally, Scott frequently reminds participants that it is their trans identities and belonging to trans communities that provides them the expertise to do this archiving work. For example, at the February 2023 community archiving session, as part of their introduction, Scott emphasized that trans people know the terminology for objects and identities and are familiar with the contexts in which these objects were created and used in a way that cisgender people would not be. An object that might be cataloged by a cisgender archivist as a "prosthetic penis," for example, would be referred to by trans community archivists as a packer, making it easier to find for trans people browsing the museum's collection. This statement demonstrates radical trust with a trans inclination: trans people are

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[32] Nova J. Bradford et al., "Sex Education and Transgender Youth: 'Trust Means Material By and For Queer and Trans People,'" *Sex Education* 19, no. 1 (2019): 84-98.

[33] Ibid., 84.

[34] Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers, 11.

at the helm of MoT, and their knowledge is uniquely valued within its work.

Conclusion

In this critical commentary, I described the Museum of Transology, an independent museum project dedicated to archiving objects representing trans lives with trans people guiding the work. In particular, MoT uses community archiving sessions, a tool of democratizing public history in which participants help catalog objects donated to the museum and in turn, helps those participants feel connected to trans history, current events, and community. I argue that this represents radical trust, in which public history spaces become part of public discourse, particularly benefitting communities that have traditionally been marginalized by museums and archives. However, it provides a uniquely trans lens to this concept, as it centers trans voices and knowledge, and advances MoT's desire to "halt the erasure of trans lives from history, tackle the misrepresentation of trans people in the political sphere, and combat the spectacularization of trans bodies and experiences by the mainstream media."[35] Radical [trans] trust expressed through community archiving is beneficial both to institutions and communities, and must be considered by any museum or archive hoping to do trans history in a way that centers actual trans voices and lives, avoiding "horribly biased representations" and focusing on "self-determined, self-confident testimonies of queer life."[36] Only approaches informed by radical [trans] trust can truly represent

[35] Scott, 191.

[36] Bosold, Scott, and Chantraine, 218.

trans people well in public history.

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